General Audiences

No Archive Warnings Apply

Gen

LEGO Ninjago

Kai & Nya (Ninjago)
Lloyd Garmadon & Kai
Cole & Kai (Ninjago)
Kai & Jay Walker
Kai & Zane (Ninjago)

Kai (Ninjago)
Nya (Ninjago)
Lloyd Garmadon
Cole (Ninjago)
Jay Walker
Zane (Ninjago)
Ray (Ninjago)
Maya (Ninjago)

Hurt/Comfort
Angst
Fluff
Big Brother Kai (Ninjago)
Kai is a good brother
Kai is a good friend
Protective Kai
Trauma
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD
the ninja have problems
kai tries to help
deep talks
Panic Attacks
Self-Esteem Issues
Self-Blame
jay has self-worth issues
they kinda all do tbh
Implied/Referenced Character Death
zane is afraid of himself
the never-realm fucked him up
cole/kai kinda
i wrote them with a qpr in mind
But it's not explicitly stated
so interpret it how you want
bad parents ray and maya
ray and maya kinda suck
Child Neglect
is it child neglect if they had nobody to neglect them?
Child Abandonment
implied/referenced child abandonment

Nightmares
Muteness
selectively mute Lloyd
Lloyd Garmadon Needs a Hug
actually
they all do
Kai (Ninjago) Needs a Hug
guys i think i'm bad at tagging
oh well
Cole Needs a Hug (Ninjago)
Zane Needs a Hug (Ninjago)
Jay Walker Needs a Hug (Ninjago)
Nya Needs a Hug (Ninjago)
Good Older Sibling Kai (Ninjago)
yes my tags are a mess
Blanket Permission
English Found family is the best family.

the weight of the sky

nickel_eyes

Summary:

The ninja have been through some shit. Sometimes they just need someone to remind them everything is alright.

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Five times Kai provided comfort for the other ninja when they were having a rough time.

Chapter 1 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/32194186/chapters/79773796): nya – ripples in a pond

"It's just so frustrating!" Nya paced around her room, back and forth in front of her bed, on which Kai was splayed out quietly, watching her movements. "Everything is supposed to be good now. It was supposed to be easy! But we find our parents after fucking twelve years and it still has to be so damn *difficult!"*

Nya wished she was in the training room right now. She could do with beating something up. Instead, she whirled around to face Kai who lifted a pillow off her bed quickly, anticipating her movements. She punched the pillow.

"I just feel like… they don't even care. We spent all this time separated from them, not even knowing if they were alive, and yet as soon as they come back into our lives they leave again! What kind of stupid- worthless- fuckwad type parents are they!" She accentuated each word with another punch to the pillow in Kai's grip.

"I mean, I'm sure that can't be easy for them, either. The last time they saw us was over a decade ago and we were just kids. It's gotta be weird for them, too, seeing us again after all this time. Just… give them some time and maybe they'll end up being great," Kai tried to reason.

"It would be a lot easier to *'give them some time'* if they were ever around to spend time with!" Nya groaned in annoyance and twisted her body, falling backward onto her bed next to Kai, who abandoned the pillow he was holding off the side of the bed once she was done abusing it. She stared up at the blank ceiling.

"Why are you so calm about this?" She asked after a few beats of silence, sitting up and turning to face him. "You've got to hate this too."

Contrary to popular belief, between Nya and Kai, Kai was probably the more calm and level-headed of the two. Sure, Kai was rash and snarky and usually itching for a fight, but he was actually surprisingly intuitive when it came to people—and Nya in particular. Nya honestly had no clue as to how people viewed her as the more collected one as she was constantly a moment away from smacking down against anyone who even looked at her funny and she had a way of finding excuses to flee the room whenever people tried to talk about their emotions around her.

Even so, Kai's total passive nature in this situation was strange. Nya thought that at least he would have punched her mattress by now.

"I do hate this," he affirmed. "But what are we supposed to do? Nya, they were kidnapped and held captive for twelve years! It makes sense that they would want to travel a bit and spend some time savoring their freedom."

"Yeah, I guess," Nya conceded. She hated when Kai was right. "But it still hurts that they're choosing that over us. What, are we not good enough?"

"Maybe you're not, but I'm hot shit," Kai was quick to respond.

"Shut up." Nya shoved Kai roughly to the side, grinning.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while before Nya asked, "Is this just what having parents is like? I guess we really wouldn't know. Maybe it's just a parent thing to ignore your kids once they reach teenagerhood. I mean, look at Cole's dad, right?"

Kai thought for a moment before responding, "it's possible. But, also, look at Jay's parents. They wouldn't stop calling him every weekend if we paid them. And Garmadon ended up being a pretty cool father."

Nya's fingers clenched onto the blanket she sat on. "Great," she muttered. "We really do just have the worst luck then. Why can't we ever just catch a fucking break!"

"You'd get bored if that were the case," Kai pointed out.

"Yeah, you're right." She sat still for a few more moments before springing to her feet again and resuming her pacing. "It just sucks! I feel like we're putting in all the effort right now. *They're* the adults, *they're* the parents, *they're* the ones who decided to birth us. They can't just decide to dismiss that responsibility now that we're grown up!"

"You're not even properly grown up yet," Kai added, his voice growing sharper.

"Shut up, neither are you," Nya shot back at Kai. She was glad that he was starting to join in on her frustration, though—it was always better if both of them were riled up because then Nya could at least maintain her guise as the sane one between them.

"Hey, I'm 18!"

Nya raised an eyebrow.

"Fuck off, I'm rounding. Anyway, you're right. I know they didn't mean to but it really just feels like they left while everything was rough and now that we've settled down and we're vaguely near adulthood and we finally have a family and don't have to worry about when each new fucking meal is coming from, they're *still* leaving and they can justify it because things *are* good."

Kai clenched at Nya's blankets just as she had done a minute before. She kept half an eye on him, prepared to call forth water in the event that he accidentally lit her bed on fire. It wouldn't be the first time.

After a moment, he relaxed slightly and quipped to Nya, who was still pacing fervently, "you're going to wear a trench into your floor if you're not careful."

"I replaced the floorboards in my room with a more sturdy material a long time ago for this exact reason," Nya muttered offhandedly. Still, she stopped her pacing as she formulated her next thought.

Kai let out a laugh. "Of course you did. You know, you really are something, sis."

"Am I a terrible person if I say that I wish we had never found our parents?" Nya interrupted bluntly. "I just feel like it would have been easier to continue thinking they were dead than to go through the pain of learning they were alive only to discover that they don't value us enough to spend any time with us."

Kai looked a bit taken aback by Nya's sudden question but was quick to answer it nonetheless. "Of course not. It's a crazy fucking thing and it's obviously causing you some distress. I kind of feel the same way. Like, maybe it would have been better if they *had* been evil, you know?"

Nya clenched her fists. "Yeah, but isn't it selfish? I mean, think of the others. Cole and Lloyd and Zane would probably kill to learn their parents weren't really dead!"

"Nya, nothing about you is selfish," Kai snapped. "And this isn't about them. They all got to spend time with their parents. You never did."

"And it seems like I fucking never will," Nya grumbled.

"Yeah, maybe so," Kai admitted. "But so what? Who needs them? You're strong and independent enough without them. Besides, you got me." He puffed out his chest a bit jokingly.

"Ugh, don't remind me," Nya groaned, but she knew that Kai could see her smile.

"Hey, wanna go visit Ray and Maya?"

Nya looked up from the mech she was tinkering with to see Kai standing in the doorway dressed in civilian clothes and twirling the key to his bike around his finger.

"Now?" she asked. "Why?"

“Yeah, now. You said you wanted to spend more time with them.” Kai shoved his key into his pocket and leant against the doorframe. Nya stayed standing on her platform and holding her wrench.

“That was, like, two weeks ago.” After their conversation about their frustrations with their parents, neither of them had brought up the topic again. Nya had assumed that Kai had been trying to forget about the issue entirely, same as her. She should have known he wouldn’t have let it drop.

“Well, I’m sorry that it took me so long to track them down to fucking *Stiix.*"

“Why are they in Stiix?” Nya asked. She tapped the wrench she was holding on her thigh in thought.

“I don’t know, maybe they love the idea of drowning. Why don’t you ask them yourself?”

Nya rolled her eyes but conceded all the same. She quickly packed up her tools and leapt down from the platform she was standing on, laughing at Kai when he jolted out of his relaxed position at the action.

“How’d you even find them?” Nya asked as they left the garage and headed to her room so she could get changed out of her grimy mechanic clothes and grab her own keys.

“I have my ways,” Kai said in an obvious attempt at being mysterious.

Nya snorted. “Yeah, right. I bet you just drove around Ninjago until you found them and that’s why you’ve been out so much lately.”

Kai stayed silent. They approached her room and Nya turned around, grinning. “No way. Did you actually? No wonder it took you so long, you probably checked Stiix last because you hate that place!”

“Shut up! What was I supposed to do, find them with *magic?* Idiot.” Nya cackled all the same. “Whatever,” Kai scoffed. “Just meet me outside in five minutes.”

Nya agreed and went into her room to get ready. Four minutes later, she emerged outside to see Kai already on his bike, her bike moved out next to his. As soon as Kai saw Nya, he grinned and yelled “last one there’s a rotten egg!” before kick-starting his bike and speeding away with a roar.

“Wha- hey!” Nya protested, sprinting to her own bike. “You fucking cheater! Oh, it’s on.” She revved the engine and zoomed after Kai.

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Some time later, Nya screeched to a halt on the edge of Stiix, Kai less than a second behind her. Nya was coated in dust and sweat and Kai was drenched to the bone with water. They were both sporting a few new bruises from some of their nastier attempts at sabotaging one another.

“I WON! Suck it, you shit sandwich!” Nya boasted. She leapt off her bike after killing the engine and blew a raspberry at Kai.

“No fair,” Kai yelled in response, following suit. “If you hadn’t dunked me at the end there I would have won for sure.” The two began to walk through Stiix with Kai leading the way as they continued to bicker. People shot them glares as they passed but otherwise didn’t bother them.

“Sucks,” Nya shrugged with a grin.

“I can’t even use my powers against you! You have an unfair advantage!”

“You could if you weren’t a coward.”

“Are you looking to get your eyebrows burned off? Because I’ll fuckin’ do it.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Kai stopped walking and looked like he was about to tackle Nya to the ground and try to burn her hair away. Nya, in turn, prepared herself to square off against Kai and probably throw him into the surrounding water to teach him a lesson. Before any of that happened, a door in front of them opened and Maya stepped out.

“Oh- hey, kids! What a pleasant surprise!”

Nya cast a glance at Kai who stared resolutely ahead at Maya. Surprise? Nya had assumed that Kai had arranged a meeting, not just planned to show up unannounced.

“Hi, May- Mom,” said Kai.

“Hey,” Nya echoed.

There was a moment of silence before Maya said “well, come on in, then,” a smile stretched across her face that didn’t reach her eyes.

Kai made to go into the house and Nya followed suit, suddenly anxious. Before Kai passed the doorway, Maya blocked him and looked at Nya, a small frown on her face.

“You’re soaked! Nya, be a dear and dry off Kai, would you?”

Nya obliged, sticking her hand out towards Kai and making a grabbing and pulling motion. The water still soaking into Kai’s clothes and hair was sucked away, leaving him dry and blinking in alarm. Nya fought back a snicker at the look on his face and at the way his hair poofed at the sudden treatment and threw the ball of water she held into the surrounding bay nearby.

They entered the dim house and took off their shoes at Maya's request before trailing after her into the kitchen. Ray was putting a tray into the oven.

"What was that ruckus outside, then?" Ray asked as he straightened up and turned a timer on the countertop, back still turned to the three of them.

"Funnily enough, it was Kai and Nya!" Maya responded in a voice that Nya found to be suspiciously chipper. "Isn't that lovely?"

Ray whirled around at Maya's words and took in the sight of Nya and Kai standing awkwardly to the side of Maya. His eyes widened in surprise.

"'Sup," Nya greeted, wanting to break the tension. She could feel Kai trying not to facepalm next to her at her awkward greeting.

There were a few beats of silence before anybody spoke again.

Ray pulled them both into awkward hugs and invited them to stay for dinner and Nya and Kai briefly talked about what they had been up to since they had all seen each other last while they waited for the food to be ready.

There were a lot of uncomfortable silences in between equally uncomfortable conversations. All in all, Nya kind of wished she hadn't agreed to come.

After what seemed like an age, the timer chimed and Maya pulled the casserole out of the oven and they were able to pretend that the silence only stretched on because they were focused on eating.

Eventually, the topic turned onto Ray and Maya.

"So what have you guys been up to?" Nya asked once she had cleared off her plate and Kai was shooting her desperate looks and awkwardly rotating his fork against the table. "We haven't heard from you in… a bit."

"Oh yes, well, we've just been traveling around Ninjago a bit. You know. Revisiting all our favorite places," Maya said.

"And you chose to live in Stiix?" Kai scoffed jokingly.

"Well, it is the most logical option, if you think about it," Maya responded coolly. "Once upon a time, I was a water elemental. And though I unfortunately no longer have the ability to control it, it still brings me comfort to be around."

Kai went a bit pink and glanced back down at the table, fork still twisting in his hand, looking like he wished he hadn't said anything

Though Nya made fun of Kai constantly, she felt herself getting annoyed in his defense. That was *her* brother, only *she* could be mean to him (and, she guessed, the other ninja, but that's because they were *family*). "Well, what about you, Ray? You were a fire elemental. Don't you dislike being around water? Kai *hates* it."

Ray looked a bit taken aback to be dragged into the conversation but responded quickly nonetheless. "Well, I admit it was not my first choice. But I guess we'll do anything if it means we get to be with the ones we love."

Nya felt a bit like she had been slapped in the face. Before she could think over her words, she found herself saying, "oh, really? I guess that's why you chose to live on the opposite side of Ninjago as us and not tell us where you are and how to contact you, huh? Because you like living near the people you love? What does that make us, then?"

Well, there it was. Nya guessed that the topic was inevitably going to come up.

There were a few moments of shocked silence (during which Nya resolutely avoided Kai's glare which she could feel burning into the side of her head) before Ray said, "Nya, hun, you have to understand…."

Nya cut him off. "Under*stand?* Understand *what?* That you don't care enough to want to be near us anymore? That you don't want to even bother to try and be our fucking parents? That you missed out on our *entire lives* and now that you're back you're just going to miss out on it some more?"

"Nya, don't speak to us like that," Maya snapped.

"Why not? It's true," Nya quickly shot back.

"Alright, let's all try to calm down now," Ray tried to placate at the same time Kai said, "guys, chill out."

They shot each other strained looks.

"Nya, you're still young and we don't expect you to understand, but this is very difficult for us," Ray said hesitantly, turning his attention back to Nya.

"And it's not difficult for *us?"*

"He didn't say that, Nya."

"Yeah, well, he implied it. And I bet it's what you believe, isn't it?"

"We were kidnapped and imprisoned against our will for twelve years," Maya snapped. "And when we were released we returned to find that the entire world has changed and everyone we knew is dead and our children are no longer children. But they sure do still act like spoiled little brats, anyway."

"Hey, watch it, that's my sister you're talking about," Kai cut in warningly. "Look—Ray, Maya—we understand that this can't be easy for you. Coming back to see that everything has changed—that *we've* changed. But I was kind of hoping

—*we* were kind of hoping—that we could try to be a- a family again. And we can't *do* that if you make it impossible to find or contact you."

"So we're just supposed to structure our entire lives around what you guys want, is that it?" Ray asked.

"No, I didn't *say* that." Nya could tell Kai was getting frustrated but was trying to avoid snapping. Luckily, she didn't have such inhibitions.

"But *yeah,* you kind of *are* supposed to do that, you're our fucking *parents.*"

"You're not children anymore!"

"Nya is only *fifteen!"*

"And yet you've managed for this long, why do you suddenly need us now?"

Nya flew to her feet so fast the chair she was sitting on toppled over behind her. She left it. "We've always needed you! You're our *parents.* Can you really blame us for trying to have a normal, happy family after all we've been through? For having people to look up to, to love us, to cook us meals and tuck us into bed at night and to tell us everything is going to be okay? We had *no one.* For *ten years.* It wasn't your fault you left but you did and it was *hard.* I learned how to cook my own meals when I was eight. I learned how to manage the forge by myself when I was eleven. I had to walk myself to school and figure out all my homework myself and handle bullies on my own. I grew up *resenting* you for leaving us and making everything so difficult, for making us grow up too fast. And now we finally get you back after over a *decade* and it's like nothing even changed because you're not acting like parents, you're acting like you're the only one who has been through any hardship. I just…" Nya blinked back the tears she didn't even realize were building behind her eyes. "I just want a fucking mom and a fucking dad and I want them to love me and to tell me everything is going to be okay."

Instead of saying anything that Nya wanted to hear: that they were sorry, that they were proud, that they loved her, that everything is okay, that they were wrong, that they wish they could have been there throughout her childhood, that they wish they could make everything better, Ray turned to Kai and said, "and where were you during this, making her cook her own meals and work the forge on her own?"

Kai stuttered over his words. "Well, I- I mean, I was… I tried my best to-"

"Oh, come off it," Nya snapped. "Don't you go trying to blame Kai for any of that shit. At least he was fucking there. He was out every day working his ass off trying to make us money so we could fucking eat and survive. Which is more than you ever did."

"Nya, it wasn't our fault we couldn't be there for you!"

"But it *is* your fault that you aren't here for us *now!"*

There were a few moments in which nobody said anything. Nya cast her gaze around the small room, taking in Kai's pleading expression, Maya's hard eyes, Ray's exasperated look.

"Fuck this. You know what? Fuck it. I'm going. I can't do this. I'm glad you guys have your lives back now. I'm glad you guys are happy. Keep on doing… I don't know. Whatever it is you're doing without us. Give us a call if you ever want to make a fucking effort and be our parents."

Nya stalked to the kitchen door and whirled around when she got there and realized Kai wasn't on her heels. "C'mon, Kai."

Kai looked torn. "I-" he cast his gaze between Nya and Maya and Ray, mouth opening and closing like a fish. "I-"

Nya's heart sank and she felt tears prick at her eyes again. "Fine. Fine. I see. It's not that you guys don't want to be a family. It's that you don't want to be a family with *me.* Okay. Well. Good for you. Fucking… fine."

And with that, Nya stomped out of the house, ignoring Kai's calls after her. She slammed the door behind her, sprinted to her bike, and sped away without looking back, tears streaming out behind her.

Fuck, why did everything always have to be so hard?

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Kai found her, later, hidden between a cluster of rocks and trees at the edge of a small stream that wound through Ignacia. She used to always go there when she was upset growing up. Honestly, it kind of annoyed her how quickly Kai found her—not even fifteen minutes after she hid her bike and sat down to mope, he was there, swearing as he tripped over leaves.

"Nya!" He exclaimed once he got in view. "Oh, good, I didn't know where to check after this. Look, are you alright?"

Nya didn't say anything. She just sat there and stared at the water and hoped that if she waited long enough Kai would just leave. Instead, Kai sat next to her and started throwing bits of pebbles and dirt into the water in front of them.

"I'm sorry it went badly. I thought that maybe if we all spent some time together then we'd get to know each other and then it would all be alright. Obviously, I was wrong."

A few moments of silence drifted past between them. Nya's eyes tracked each pebble as Kai threw it into the water, watched as the ripples extended out and overlapped.

“What you said as you left,” Kai said hesitantly. He stopped throwing things and Nya saw him move his hands to fiddle with something in his lap in her peripheral vision. “I would never want to be in a family without you. I didn’t mean to make it seem like I was choosing their side or anything. I just wanted to stay behind and try to explain things to them. I wanted to try and salvage things. I- I’m sorry.”

Kai began breaking apart the stick that he was fiddling with, throwing each part into the water. “You don’t have to forgive me. It’s okay. But I want you to understand that I love you. And you’re important to me. And I’d choose you over them every time. I’d choose you over *anybody* every time.”

He threw the last pieces of his stick into the water. Nya still refused to look at him, to give any sign that she was listening. She was still angry, still annoyed, still hurt. Maybe not at Kai, exactly, but he was here, he was convenient.

“Um…” Kai was out of words. Good. Maybe he’d leave and she’d have even more of an excuse to sit here and feel sorry for herself and hate everyone. “Okay. That’s it, I guess. I’m here if you want to talk. But… I’m sorry. I love you. I’m proud of you. And everything is going to be alright.”

And then *fuck,* she was crying.

She tried to hide it, keep her breathing even, settle her shaking hands and shoulders, bite back the sobs, but Kai knew her too well, the bastard, and before she knew it, he was pulling her into a hug and she was sobbing into his shoulder.

“It’s okay, sis,” he tried to soothe.

“I just- I thought that maybe- maybe you were right- maybe we could be a family- but- but they don’t understand anything, they don’t love us, they don’t even seem to *like* us, and- and we’re never going to properly have parents, are we? Everything is just going to be sucky forever, nothing is ever going to go right for us because why *would* they? How fucking sad is it that- that after everything- after a decade of hardship and barely scraping by- we finally get our parents back- we find out our parents are *alive* and they didn’t *mean* to leave us and- and not even *that* goes right. Fuck. Is it something wrong with us? Is there something wrong with me?”

Nya found herself being pulled away from Kai’s body, his hands firmly on her shoulders. She sniffed and looked up at him in confusion. His eyes were hard and wet.

“*No.* There is *nothing* wrong with you, do you hear me? You are wonderful and amazing and the best ninja and the best sister and you’re so capable and smart and you’re the reason I survived this long. If Ray and Maya can’t see that, fuck them. You deserve an amazing family and amazing life and I’m sorry that you didn’t get that, I’m sorry that I couldn’t give that to you. But you have a chance, now, to live your perfect life. Build vehicles and fight bad guys and go on dates with Jay and bend water and laugh and smile and be happy, okay?”

Nya blinked.

“*Okay?*”

“Sheesh, yes, okay.” Nya rolled her eyes at Kai’s sincerity and insistence.

When he said, “good,” and let go of her, Nya wiped her nose with her sleeve and punched Kai in the shoulder for “making the moment gross and sappy,” but secretly she was happy for his words.

“You good?” he asked once she had evened her breathing and rearranged her face into something less pathetic.

“Yeah, always,” she responded with a wink.

Kai smiled. “Good.” Suddenly, his grin turned into something more sinister. “Hey. I have an idea. Do you want to go TP Ray and Maya’s house?”

Nya felt the corners of her mouth lift into what was surely an identical evil grin to Kai’s.

“Oh, yeah, totally.”

Kai jumped to his feet and immediately began to sprint away, tumbling gracelessly through the surrounding trees. “You get toilet paper, I’ll get eggs! Last one to Stiix is a fart stick!” he yelled over his shoulder.

Nya sprang to her feet and took off, hot on his heels. “Oh, you’re *on.*”

Chapter 2 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/32194186/chapters/79774453) : lloyd – the serenity of a forest

Lloyd woke up, as per usual, in the middle of the night, gasping and shaking and not a hundred percent sure he knew where he was. He really fucking hated nightmares.

Once he got his bearings and the scattered images of his dreams stopped flashing so quickly behind his eyelids and he remembered that he was in the Monastery, he was *safe* (he was safe, he was safe, he was safe), Lloyd rolled over and looked at the clock.

2:18 AM.

Great. Fucking great.

Too early to get up and start his day but too late to stay up and read. The only thing he could do was go back to sleep.

It was fine. It was okay. It was all good. Sleep is great. Nothing could get him in his sleep. He was safe within the walls of the Monastery, he was safe, he was safe, he was *safe* and his family were all just a few rooms away, nothing has happened, nothing has gone wrong, everything is fine, everything is alright, everybody is okay, it's safe here, it's safe, he's safe, everybody is safe and happy and alive and they haven't been kidnapped, they haven't been possessed, they haven't been killed, they haven't left him, they're here they're fine everything is finefinefinefine*fine*.

(Everything was not fine.)

Lloyd was on his feet, shaking like a leaf before he could even process his next thoughts. He would just go to the kitchen. To grab a drink of water. And then use the toilet. And, hey, since everybody else's rooms were just conveniently along that route, it wouldn't hurt to peek in on them. Not because he didn't believe everything was alright but, ya know, to make sure. He was the team leader, after all. It was just being a good leader. That's all. Nothing more to it. Yup. Definitely.

He quietly padded out into the hall, light on his feet after years of sneaking around Darkleys and subsequently being a ninja.

He peered into everyone's rooms as he passed: Jay across the hall, Zane and Cole across from each other in the rooms between Lloyd and the kitchen. He was glad everybody slept with their doors open and was comforted to see their motionless forms under piles of blankets and hear their soft breathing echo around the small rooms.

He arrived in the kitchen, filled up a glass of water, and chugged it. After a couple more glasses he felt considerably less stressed (and less parched) and figured it would be alright, now, to return to his room. Just right after he used the bathroom. Which, wow, how convenient, was on the other end of the hall, meaning he would have to pass by Kai and Nya's rooms!

He made his way back down the hall, checking once again on the three he just passed, and then Nya and Kai. Only… Lloyd couldn't hear Kai's soft breaths. Lloyd couldn't see Kai's form under his blankets on his bed.

Lloyd's eyes quickly scanned the dark room as he walked farther in, his heart rate rising rapidly. "Kai?" he whispered urgently into the dark room. He got no response. He tore the blankets from Kai's bed to make sure he wasn't there before turning around and walking quickly out the room, now thoroughly panicking. His eyes scanned the hallway as he tried to think of where he could be, what could have happened, what he could do. He felt frozen.

Images started flooding his brain from his nightmare; his memories: danger, destruction, fighting, fear, pain, loss, death. Everyone he loves hurt. Everyone he loves in danger. Everybody he loves dying, leaving him alone alonealonealone and it's all his fault hisfaulthisfaulthisfault.

He felt like he was floating. He didn't know where he was. His breathing was heavy, his eyesight was blurry, his heartbeat was in his fingertips, there was a roaring sound in his ears, everything was wrong, everything was wrongwrongwrongwrong*wrong.*

His brain clutched frantically at the mission. The *mission*. *Suck it up. Complete the mission. You're the green ninja. The world depends on you. If things go wrong it's on you*.

"Kai?" he tried again, weakly. "*Kai?* Kai!"

"Woah, what's up, greenbean?"

Lloyd whirled around. He launched himself at Kai before either of them could even process what was happening and started sobbing into his shoulder.

(Weakweakweakweakweak.)

"Wha- hey. It's okay, bud. It's alright. I'm here. I'm here." Lloyd could barely hear Kai's murmured reassurances, could barely feel his hand softly carding through his hair. He was still struggling to calm down, struggling to place himself in space, in time.

"Lloyd. Lloyd. Can you hear me?"

Lloyd nodded jerkily against Kai's chest even though he felt miles away, sounded like he was speaking through water. *(Water? Oh no. He was speeding down a river in a dark cave, weakweak so weak, he couldn't swim, couldn't keep his head above the water, nobody was coming to save him, he was alonealonealone-)*

Kai's voice floated back to him again. "-in…. and out. There we go. Take your time. Just listen to my heartbeat. Good job. It's all okay."

Lloyd somehow, after many nights just like this, understood what was happening. He tried to focus his attention on Kai's body against him, Kai's chest rising and falling against his head, Kai's heart beating steadily next to his ear. His breathing slowed as he tried to match his rhythm. In. Out. It was okay. It was okay.

After an indiscernible amount of time, Lloyd managed to open his eyes and shift in Kai's gentle grasp. Kai's arms slowly fell away, but he remained close, warm hands gently touching Lloyd's arms, grounding him.

"You good now?"

Lloyd thought for a moment before nodding.

"Do you want to talk about it or no?"

Memories briefly flashed through his mind as he was reminded of his nightmare and he was shaking his head before he could even properly consider his answer.

"Okay. Okay. That's all good." Kai's hands moved up and down Lloyd's arms slowly, comfortingly. "Okay, here are our options. We could go back to bed-" Lloyd started shaking his head again, not wanting to be alone in his room, not wanting to be haunted by more visions of death, of danger, of loss.

"*Not* by yourself, Lloyd, don't worry," Kai said, somehow reading his mind. "You're welcome in my room any time. You know that. So, still no to bed, then?"

Though the thought of returning to sleep in Kai's bed was definitely a less frightening proposal, the thought still did not particularly agree with him. Especially after what a wreck he had been tonight. It was going to be a recipe for trouble and nightmares regardless. And he didn't want to make Kai calm him down twice tonight. He shook his head again.

"Okay, that's cool. So let's do something then. We could watch a movie in the living room. Or we could cook something. Play video games... oh, I know! There's that twenty-four-hour arcade! We haven't gone there in ages!"

Lloyd considered his options. The arcade *did* sound fun. He hadn't spent time going out and having fun and being a kid in ages. Or even getting out of the Monastery for anything not ninja (or shopping) related. But… that would mean leaving everyone. Here. Asleep. In the dark. Alone.

The conflict must have shown on his face because Kai said, "Hey, don't worry about the others if you want to go out. They'll be fine. They're all fully trained ninja, too. You don't always have to worry about protecting everyone, Lloyd. They're capable."

Fuck. Kai had a good point. Okay. Okay, then. He was gonna do it. He was gonna go to the arcade with Kai. He tried to hype himself up and convince himself it would be fun and wouldn't end horribly badly. He opened his mouth to tell Kai of his decision but no words came out. Fuck. Of course. Why *wouldn't* this happen? Not only did he have to be a nervous wreck but now he couldn't even freaking speak? He was so weakweakweak uselessuseless*useless*-

"Ah. That's alright. Just hold up one finger for movie, two for cooking, three for arcade, and four for something else."

Honestly, thank FSM for Kai. Lloyd held up three fingers. Kai's face split into a grin.

"Yes! I was hoping you would pick that. Oh, man, we're gonna have so much *fun*. Grab your shoes, I'm driving." Kai bounced on his heels and released Lloyd (his arms felt cold at the sudden absence of touch) before beginning to bound into his room.

Lloyd's heart dropped as Kai disappeared into the dark room. He blanched and hurried to catch up to Kai, grabbing onto the back of his shirt when he reached him a second later and immediately feeling calmer when he made contact with Kai.

Kai turned his attention away from the shoes he was slipping on. "Oh, fuck. Sorry, kid. I should have asked. Here, gimme one sec-" he quickly pulled his second shoe on before holding his hand out towards Lloyd, pinkie finger extended. Lloyd hooked his own pinkie onto Kai's, smiling slightly.

The two went to Lloyd's room, Kai grabbing his keys on the way out of his own, and Lloyd awkwardly put his shoes on with one hand. When they reached the garage, they put their helmets on before breaking their contact for a moment to clamber onto Kai's bike.

"Sorry, greenie, I'm gonna have to use both hands to drive. Grab onto me tight, though. And poke me if you need me to pull over, 'kay? Promise?" Lloyd nodded firmly. "Cool. Alright, here we go!"

And then they were tearing through the night. The wind whistled past and the stars twinkled in the sky. Pitch black covered the streets before they came into view of the city, making trees loom out of the darkness on their sides, illuminated only by the pale light of the crescent moon. The bike roared underneath Lloyd, drowning out the subtle sounds of nighttime. Lloyd gripped tightly onto Kai, as promised, and beneath his fingers he felt Kai's heart rate increase in a rush of adrenaline.

Once they hit the city, Kai dashed through red lights and swerved around the sparse cars that decorated the streets. The tall buildings looming overhead passed in a blur, creating streaks of colorful light in Lloyd's peripheral vision.

A smile danced across Lloyd's face. He felt good. He felt free. He felt alive.

After ten minutes, Kai screeched to a halt in front of a low building in a deserted part of town. The dim neon lights overhead advertised *A ly' Arc e*, some of the letters long burnt out. A sign on the door written in bold, scrawling letters said that it was open 24/7.

"We're here!" Kai said, jumping off the bike and hooking his helmet onto the handlebar. Lloyd followed suit, scrambling down and removing his helmet before accepting Kai's proffered pinkie finger and letting himself be dragged into the building.

The arcade was expectedly empty, which Lloyd was thankful for—he didn't really want to deal with people right now. There was one person: a tired-looking woman wearing a brightly colored striped uniform, whose name tag read *Cara*.

“Hello!” Kai greeted with too much volume and cheer for this time of night. “Could we get some tokens?” Lloyd nudged him. “Please?” he tacked on. Lloyd snickered softly. How was it that he, who had grown up at a boarding school for bad boys, had to remind Kai to be polite?

Once they had obtained their tokens (leaving Cara gaping in shock behind the counter after Kai tipped her a frankly obscene amount of money with a wink) Lloyd and Kai ventured into the small maze of old-fashioned video game consoles.

“Oh, god, you’re gonna have to pick what we play. I’ve never played most of these,” Kai said, eyeing the blocky lettering plastered on the sides and top of the machines. To be fair, Lloyd probably had as little experience with these games as Kai but he was happy to oblige. After taking a lap around the whole arcade (and taking a quick inventory of where the exits and most dangerous objects and threats in the room were along the way) he parked them in front of a dark green box with the name *Forest: Deer Simulator* painted neatly on its side.

“Really?” asked Kai as he took in the game in front of them.

Lloyd nodded firmly. Even if the name kind of sucked, it seemed like a cool game. Nice. Calming. It would be nice to be a deer, he thought. Maybe he could just spend some time running around a virtual forest and eating virtual berries and then everything would be fine and all his troubles would disappear.

“Is there even a multiplayer mode?”

Lloyd mashed a couple of buttons to navigate to the main menu, revealing that, yes, there was a two-player multiplayer mode. “Alright,” Kai conceded. “Guess we’re gonna be deer. This is perfect for you, green machine, you’re gonna blend right in.” Lloyd rolled his eyes. The deer wasn’t gonna be green.

They maneuvered themselves so they each use their respective controls and only released their grip on one another once their shoulders were comfortably pressed against each other side by side. Lloyd held a thumbs up to show he was ready before hitting the start button of the game.

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They played for probably too long. Lloyd took the game very seriously, carefully selecting the correct foods to eat and finding the safest routes to take over rivers and hiding silently in the grass when predators passed. Kai, on the other hand, spent his time sprinting recklessly through the forest, picking fights with bears, and launching himself off of cliffs, all the while laughing gleefully. To be fair to Kai, though, it really was funny to watch his pixelated deer flailing its limbs as it flew through the air or headbutted a bear.

Kai finally managed to pry Lloyd away from the game after they had gotten to the end of their second batch of tokens and weak sunlight began to stream through the front windows.

“Lloyd we’ve been here for *three hours*. The others are gonna wake up and freak out when we’re not there.”

That certainly snapped him back to the real world. He reluctantly allowed the time to run out on his game without entering a new token and carefully inputted *Lloyd G* into the leaderboard.

“Hey, we can come back any time,” Kai reassured. “Any time but now. Come on, let’s *go!* I’m starving, I want some breakfast!” Kai tugged on Lloyd’s sleeve and pouted exaggeratedly.

“Okay, okay, I’m *coming!"* Lloyd chuckled.

Kai’s face split into a wide grin. “I’m proud of you, kid,” he said softly, ruffling Lloyd’s hair before grabbing Lloyd’s hand and dragging him out of the arcade at a run.

Lloyd whooped with joy as they shot away on the bike and tore through the awakening city streets with no regard for the speed limits. He closed his eyes and let the wind rush past his face, laughing in elation, his wide smile a permanent fixture on his face as he clutched onto Kai and sped into the new day.

Chapter 3 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/32194186/chapters/79823200): cole – where the sky meets the earth

Cole tangled his fingers into Kai’s hair. His other hand was occupied with his phone, mindlessly scrolling through Chipper. They were alone in the living room, Cole sitting reclined on the old couch and Kai sprawled across him, head resting in his lap, also on his phone.

After a while in this position, Kai clicked off his phone and threw it haphazardly to the side. He groaned and stretched, causing Cole to shift his own attention down to Kai. He quirked an eyebrow in question.

“I’m *bored*,” Kai whined, drawing out his words. “We should *do* something.”

“What; is my company not enough?” Cole said jokingly, turning off his own phone and dropping it next to him onto the couch cushion. He hoped his tone didn’t betray the sincerity of his question.

“Shut up, you know you are,” Kai grumbled. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “I’ll stay here with you if you want but, come on, we’ve been here for*ever*. We should do something else!” He grabbed Cole’s hands and started playing with his fingers, bending them to crack the knuckles. “Pwetty pwease?” Kai batted his eyes exaggeratedly.

Cole laughed and gently tugged his hands back from Kai. “Alright, alright. What did you have in mind?”

Kai pouted from Cole's removal of his hands and began trailing his own hands up and down Cole's legs. "I don't know. I didn't think that far. You think of something."

Cole rolled his eyes. "You're the one who whined about doing something else. Why do I have to brainstorm activities?"

"Because you're the bestest."

"Damn right."

"And you're so smart and good at that planning shit."

"Okay, shut up, I'm trying to think."

"And you're so cool and you have the best ideas and you're fun to be around and you're so considerate and kind and-"

"Oh my god, shut *up*. I'll leave," Cole threatened but he knew his grin betrayed him. He pushed Kai off the couch all the same. Kai fell off inelegantly and hit the floor with a thump. He jumped to his feet, eyes bright with his own smile.

"Cool. Where are we leaving to, then?"

"You're ridiculous. Okay, why don't we spar?"

Kai stuck his tongue out. "Blegh. Too much effort."

"A walk?"

"Boring. You know, I may have to take it back. You suck at this."

"You're just a picky bastard. Cooking?"

Kai shrugged. "Alright. Just as long as I can be in charge—I want to make something edible."

"You're an asshole. Has anybody ever told you that?"

"Constantly. You know I'll make a better cake than you, though."

"We're making cake?" Cole sat up straighter, suddenly much more excited.

"Duh. Now come on." Kai grabbed Cole's hand and pulled him in the direction of the kitchen. Cole stood up and let himself be pulled, leaving his phone behind on the couch with Kai's. He didn't need it—if there was an emergency the entire Monastery would go off in alarm.

They got to the kitchen and Kai started directing Cole to grab different ingredients as he rummaged around a drawer to try and find the recipe. "We should really bind all those together," Cole noted, looking over Kai's shoulder as he sorted through the numerous loose-leaf pages. Each had a different recipe scrawled across it in the ninja's various handwriting. Most were from Zane's database, jotted down in case any of the others wanted to prepare a meal, but some were home recipes from the others. Cole knew all of his were untouched at the bottom of the drawer.

"Yeah, probably," said Kai distractedly. He finally pulled a page free from the pile. "Okay, here we go…" He ran his finger down the list of ingredients, muttering under his breath. "We're doing chocolate, yeah?" he asked when he got to the bottom.

Cole nodded in agreement. "Cool. Just grab the cocoa powder then and we're all set." Cole obliged.

After setting the temperature of the oven and buttering their trays, Cole dug out a bowl and they started combining the ingredients. Kai nearly had a stroke when Cole tried to use a drinking glass to measure out the cup of flour and after that he was placed on mixing duty because he could "do less damage there."

"Admit it," said Cole, whisking the eggs into the dry ingredients. "You just want me mixing because we don't have an electric whisk and I'm the stronger between us."

"You shut your face," Kai said in response but he didn't deny it. When Cole pointed this out Kai just ignored him and poured in the milk. Cole laughed out loud and flexed his muscles, causing Kai to go slightly pink.

"Okay, fine, you can do the next few ingredients while I mix," Kai said in retort.

"Sounds good to me!" Cole relinquished the bowl to Kai. "What's next?"

"One and a half cups of warm water. Ah ah ah—the cup *measurement*."

Cole sheepishly drew his hand away from the drinking glass he had grabbed earlier and instead picked up the plastic red scoop Kai was gesturing towards that was labeled 1½. He walked over to the sink, placed the scoop beneath the tap, and twisted it.

Immediately, the water sprayed out at a much higher velocity than he expected. It ricocheted off the scoop he was holding and splashed towards him. Startled, Cole dropped the cup measurement and jumped back. Breathing heavily, he frantically began to check himself over to make sure no water had hit him.

It would be okay, he was okay, he was still here after all. But when he looked down to see a wet spot staining his shirt, his heart nearly leapt out of his chest. Oh no. Oh FSM. Oh *fuck*.

Vaguely, he noticed Kai's voice past the ringing in his ears, felt his hands distantly on his arms. Hands he shouldn't be able to feel, *arms* he shouldn't be able to feel. He wasn't here, he wasn't real he was a ghost he was just vapor and mist he was an illusion he was disappearing he was already *gone* ... And yet there was warmth and a voice and he was "real, Cole,

you're real, you're okay, you're here, you're solid, you're alright, you're not a ghost anymore, I'm here, you're here, it's all alright."

Slowly he came back to his body. He focused on the warmth of Kai's hands on his arms, rubbing slowly and firmly up and down; on the feeling of his feet planted solidly on the floor, the cool wood chilling his bare feet slightly; on the feeling of the warm water lightly sticking his shirt to his chest. He heard Kai's clear words and the gentle hum of the oven heating itself. It dinged to signify it was warmed to the temperature he set. The subtle smells of oven warmth and half-finished cake batter filled the air. His mouth was dry and he could still taste bitter traces of the cocoa powder he had licked after Kai had warned him it wasn't as sweet as it looked.

Eventually, he blinked and images of ghosts and water and cliff sides and purple gas dissipated from his vision, bringing Kai's face into focus in front of him. His eyes were calm but worried and his mouth was pulled into a tense line.

"You back with me?" he asked when Cole made clear eye contact.

Cole cleared his throat before responding. "Yeah. I'm good. Sorry about that."

"Dude. All good." Kai dropped his hands from Cole's arms and stepped back a bit. "But uh… could you get rid of the rock in the middle of the kitchen?"

Cole furrowed his eyebrows in confusion for a brief moment before he looked past Kai to see that there was indeed a craggy rock spire between himself and the sink. Oh. He didn't even remember making that. Nevertheless, he waved his hand and caused it to crumble away into nothing.

"So, should we get back to it?" asked Cole once that was done.

"If you're still up to it."

"Yeah, of course. I'm not just going to give up on cake halfway through! But I think it would be better if I mixed from now on."

"Yeah, of course, dude. Whatever you want."

Cole didn't know whether to feel thankful for Kai for being so cool about the situation or annoyed at him. He settled for a third option and, sitting down with the bowl back at the table, flushed with shame.

He mindlessly stirred the batter as Kai cautiously turned the sink on and filled the cup measurement before bringing it back to add to the mixture. He hoped the darkening of his cheeks wasn't too noticeable.

Kai carefully poured the water into the batter carefully, making sure it didn't splash anywhere and Cole nearly ragged on him for babying him before remembering that Kai was also apprehensive around water.

(And maybe being handled gently wasn't the worst thing in the world anyway.)

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Eventually, they finished making the batter and slotted it into the oven. Kai had looked horrified when Cole had suggested Kai just roast it in his hands and he had even shot down Cole's idea to double the oven's heat to halve the time. "This is why all your cooking is shit, Cole." Well, excuse him for trying to think outside the box. Whenever Jay and Nya and Zane and Pixal say crazy stuff like that he never thinks it'll work but somehow they're the engineering geniuses.

The two of them quickly whipped together some frosting, adding an appalling amount of powdered sugar. Cole ate a considerable amount of it before Kai caught on and told him off.

"You should have listened to my ideas to bake the cake faster! Then I wouldn't have had time to eat this much! Really, this is your fault."

"Do you want this cake to be good or not!"

Kai moved the frosting bowl away and sat on Cole's lap to "make sure you can't get up and fuck anything up" which seemed like a fair enough trade-off to Cole. Cole made him reach for a marker on the table and spent his time inking patterns onto Kai's skin while they chatted aimlessly for a while.

"You feeling better?" Kai murmured after a while once he had finished admiring the dragon that now wrapped up his wrist and forearm. Cole sighed as he began hashing x's onto Kai's fingers.

"A little. I guess. I don't know, you know how it is. It just feels like it's so much effort all the time and for what? I feel stupid and weak and then I hate myself for invalidating my own feelings like that and then I hate myself for hating myself and it's just this vicious cycle. And all the while I'm getting set off by stupid things like the sink water splashing. Or heights. Or the freaking dark. It just… it all feels so pointless sometimes. Like it's never gonna end. We're not even going through any tragedies right now. Everybody is here and safe and alive and no one is threatening Ninjago and yet I'm always on edge. I wish I could just feel *normal*. I wish I could just be happy and content."

Kai hummed in response. Cole could feel the vibrations as Kai kicked their shared chair's legs softly with his heel. After a long silence, filled only by their soft breathing and the quiet scratch of Cole's marker against Kai's skin, Kai said, "Hey. I really appreciate you, man."

Cole's mouth twitched into a grin. "Me too, dude."

"No, seriously. I'm glad you exist. I'm glad you're here. I'm glad I know you."

Cole looked up from the black vortex that he had inked into existence on Kai's palm. Kai's face was pulled into a slight frown, his eyes wide and honest and earnest. Cole's heart warmed.

"I know. I love you too."

"Shush, this isn't about me. You gotta say those things about you, too."

"What?"

"Yeah, man. Say you're glad you exist and are here and you met you. Okay, maybe not the last one."

Cole swallowed a lump in his throat. "Alright, fine. I'm glad I exist and I'm glad I'm here. And I'm glad I met *you*. Happy?"

"As long as you are, rock-man."

"Now can I get back to drawing please?"

Cole tried to move his marker back to start outlining a volcano onto the back of Kai's hand but Kai began to wiggle out of his grasp.

"Wha- hey! Get back here! What happened to you being glad I was here!"

"Shush, I'll be right back. Just checking on the cake; it should be done soon."

"Oooh." Cole's slight annoyance dissipated. He stared eagerly after Kai as he opened the oven and pricked the almost-cake with a toothpick. "What's the verdict?" he asked as Kai inspected the pick.

"I think it needs a few more. It's nearly done, though."

"Heck yeah." He paused before asking, "are you gonna make me wait for it to cool first or can we just eat it?"

Kai leaned against the countertop and seemed to mull it over. He shot a glance at the clock ticking softly on the kitchen wall and winced slightly. "Yeah, we can skip the cooling part. As much as I love hanging out I don't want to spend my *whole* night on cake."

"You're the best."

Kai winked. "Duh."

They spent a couple of minutes in peaceful silence. Cole pulled his leg onto his lap to draw patterns onto his calf. They didn't look as nice decorating his skin as Kai's but it was more about the action than the product. Besides, hardly anything looked as good as Kai, regardless.

Kai continued to lean nonchalantly against the countertop, his fingers tapping irregularly onto the surface behind him. At one point the sound of the soft clicks of his nails disappeared for a few moments and Cole glanced up to see Kai's eyes and head drooping in exhaustion briefly before he snapped back to attention.

Cole felt a dark guilt churn in his stomach for making Kai stay up so late, for being exhausting, for being a burden. He wanted to tell Kai that he was welcome to leave and go to bed but the words stuck in his throat. He was too afraid Kai would actually take him up on the offer.

After a few minutes, Kai pushed himself off the counter and opened the oven again, once again sticking the cake with the toothpick and inspecting it before turning off the oven and sliding the tray out with his bare hands.

"Kai! We've talked about this! Grab an oven mitt!" Cole exclaimed, his excitement for the cake (and his still churning guilt) briefly set aside to scold Kai.

Kai rolled his eyes as he put the cake tray onto the table in front of him. "I'm the *fire* ninja."

"Don't give me that bullcrap, I know you're not immune to burns."

"Whatever. I just forgot, okay? Anyway, that's not important right now." He gestured to the cake with a flourish. "Cake!"

"Fine," Cole conceded. He reached across the table for the frosting Kai had set aside earlier and quickly spooned it out onto the cake and sloppily spread it over the top.

"Oh my god, as soon as I let you do anything you make it look like a mess!" Kai exclaimed.

Cole wanted to argue but as he surveyed the frosting unevenly coating the cake and melting off the sides, he found that Kai was right. Oh well, he wasn't going to let himself become perturbed.

"Ah, who cares what it looks like! What it tastes like is the real magic." He stuck his hand into the bowl and swiped the rest of the frosting clinging to the sides of it onto his finger before sucking it clean. "Now. Get me a spoon. It's time to feast!"

Kai rolled his eyes but Cole could see the fond sparkle in them.

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They ate the whole cake.

To be fair, it's not like it was a huge cake or anything, and as Cole took his last bite, he couldn't find it in himself to feel bad about it. It had tasted damn good. Besides, now he didn't have to share it with the others.

Kai watched as Cole demolished his last bite with a look of slight awe on his face. "I will never know where all that food goes," he marveled.

“You’re just a lightweight,” Cole teased. Kai had gotten through only two and a half slices before he tapped out, threatening to throw up if he had any more. “Oh well, it just means more for me!”

They grabbed their plates and dumped them into the sink, silently agreeing to not worry about washing the dishes until daylight. (Or, more likely, until they were forced to.)

“Alright what’s-,” Kai cut himself off with a wide yawn. “Ah, sorry.” He smacked his lips together and rubbed his eyes before returning to his train of thought. “What’s next?”

“Hm?” Cole asked, stifling a yawn of his own. Damn contagious yawning.

“What are we doing next? Wanna return to the couch or what?”

Cole furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “What? You barely got that sentence out. Aren’t you going to bed?”

“Are you?” Kai shot back.

Cole pondered it over for a second, assessing his own exhaustion and calculating the amount of nervous energy still buzzing under his skin. “No. Not yet. I don’t know if I will tonight. I still… yeah.” Words were hard but luckily Kai knew him well enough, even in his exhaustion, that he knew what he meant.

“Okay. Then neither am I.”

“*Kai*.”

Kai stared up at Cole defiantly. “It’s happening whether you like it or not, boulder brains.”

Stubborn freaking idiot. Cole opened his mouth to argue but only sighed when he realized it was no use. They had had this argument many times before and it always ended the same way: Kai refusing to back down and Cole eventually just giving in. He might as well just skip to the end and avoid all the hassle.

“Fine.” He glanced at the clock and did a quick calculation in his head. “Come on, the sun is rising soon. Let’s go out and watch.”

Kai nodded, defenses dropping when he realized he wouldn’t have to fight Cole to stay up with him longer. “Okay, lead the way,” he said sleepily.

Though he was exasperated with Kai, Cole’s heart flooded with warmth as he gripped Kai’s hand and steered them outside. He planted them on the walkway around the courtyard, facing east. They would have a better view if they sat on the staircase on the cliffside but Cole tried to avoid thinking about the fact that he lived on the top of a mountain if he could avoid it and sitting on a cliffside did not help accomplish that goal. (At least it wasn’t a flying ship.)

Anyway, though it would take a little longer for them to see the sun peeking over the courtyard walls, it wasn’t like they had any other plans.

As the stars faded from the sky, the darkness chased away by the hazy blue and yellow seeping into the horizon, birds began to chitter in the trees. A gentle breeze rustled past, tousling Cole’s hair and blowing some stray hairs into his face. He deftly brushed them back into place.

Somewhere in between the slow brightening of the sky and the moment Cole actually saw the sun, minutes after any words had been spoken between them, Kai’s head fell softly onto Cole’s shoulder. His fingers were still intertwined with Cole’s but his grip was slack and his breathing was deep and even. Cole smiled softly and carefully shifted so Kai was laying more comfortably on his lap.

Cole tangled his fingers into Kai’s hair. His other hand was planted surely on the ground behind him, stabilizing him in his slightly reclined position. He watched as the sun finally materialized over the Monastery walls and basked in the warmth of the new day, a small, peaceful smile on his face.

Chapter 4 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/32194186/chapters/79824082): jay – the quiet grief of stars

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes (#chapter_4_endnotes).)

Jay didn’t bother to turn around when he heard footsteps pad up behind him, nor when the person they belonged to sat down next to him. He continued to stare out over the horizon at the darkening sky, letting the wind ruffle his hair and tapping his fingers against the stone stairs beneath him.

Kai sat silently for a few moments while Jay tried to tune out the anxious energy that Kai’s gaze on him caused—maybe if he ignored him he’d go away. He didn’t need his blame or ridicule right now.

After a minute, Kai turned his eyes away from Jay and looked out into the sky, mirroring Jay’s gaze. They both knew that neither of them was looking at anything, just using the empty space in front of them as somewhere easy to train their eyes.

Kai sighed like he was about to say something (probably to remind Jay that he was a failure and it was his fault that- that Zane-) and Jay's calm front snapped. He whipped to face Kai, tears quickly gathering in his eyes. "If you're here to tell me it was my fault what happened, then forget about it, okay? I know. If I had just stayed quiet or helped repair the mech faster, or, or... fought better in the battle or *something*, everything would be alright! The snakes wouldn't have found us or we would have won against them and Zane…"

He cut himself off with a sharp gasp and turned away again, blinking fast. "I *know* I'm the weakest link on the team, alright?" he said quietly, bordering on a whisper. "I *know* that it should have been me instead of him. You don't have to rub it in." He squeezed his eyes shut, a tear tracing its way down his cheek, and prepared for Kai to yell at him and affirm what he had said.

Instead, he felt Kai grab his shoulders and spin him roughly to face him. Jay's eyes flew open in surprise. Kai's face was painted with anger and Jay internally winced. Great, Kai was making him *see* his anger and disappointment towards him.

Kai lifted a finger scoldingly at Jay and heatedly said, "don't you *ever* say those things. You hear me, Jay Walker? Not *ever*. You are *such* a valuable member of our team and I would never, not in a *million* years blame you for what happened or… or wish it were *you* instead of- of him."

Jay blinked, eyes wide in confusion as another tear found its way down his face. "Do you understand me?" Kai said, voice still stern and angry. "Your life is worth *so* much. Don't *ever* think that it should have been you."

Jay didn't respond.

"*Do you understand me?"* Kai reiterated, emphasizing each word as his grip on Jay's shoulder tightened somewhat uncomfortably. Jay snapped back to reality and nodded vigorously, though he was unsure he really meant it. At the moment, he more interested in trying to get Kai to stop gripping and yelling at him.

Thankfully, Kai did release his grip on Jay. "Good," he muttered, turning his gaze back over the horizon. There were a few more beats of silence before Jay braved words.

"But… but you're the one who's always saying I'm the worst member of the team! I mean, just yesterday you volunteered me to go into that beetle, and then later you got all pissy when I saved you from those fire snakes! I thought… I thought you'd be glad to see me- to see me... go instead of- of… instead of him."

Kai turned back to Jay so quickly it gave him whiplash, a hurt look on his face. "I- I would *never*, I-" he made eye contact with Jay briefly before continuing, "those were just *jokes*, I could *never* think that."

Jay pulled a face, disbelieving.

"Really!" Kai defended. "I just thought, well... I thought it was so obvious that you're, like, the most capable member of our team. I thought you getting all defensive was just a bit! I-" his eyes looked a bit wild as he stumbled over his words, trying to explain himself. "I don't know, that's just how I… fuck-, I just thought- I- you've been thinking I've been serious about that this *whole time*? I-" Kai's eyes softened with hurt. "I'm *so* sorry."

Jay shrugged and looked away from Kai again. "You're just saying that because I'm sad," he brushed off. "It's okay, you don't need to lie. I know I'm the worst ninja. It's- it's okay."

"Jay, *no*, how could you think that?" Kai said incredulously.

"Because it's true," Jay responded simply. "I mean, I'm the worst in combat, I talk a lot and I'm annoying, I'm clumsy, I constantly make situations worse for all of us, and I don't even have any extra skills that make me useful—I'm only really decent at building and electronics and Zane and Nya are both better than me at that." Jay realized his slip and he swallowed a lump in his throat, correcting quietly, "*was* better than me."

Kai didn't say anything for a few moments. Jay watched the last of the sun dip into the sea in the distance. When Jay turned to look at Kai and see why he had stopped talking, he saw Kai blinking at him in wild disbelief.

"Jay, you are the *stupidest* person I know," he said when Jay mirrored his look.

Jay sighed miserably. "Yeah, add that to the list too."

"No, I-" Kai groaned in frustration. There were a couple more moments of silence when Kai seemed to be gathering his thoughts before he asked, "Jay, who was the first of us to learn Spinjitzu?"

Confused, Jay thought back to that day in the cave when they had recovered the Scythe of Quakes. "Me, but you technically learned it *quicker* -"

"Right, and who did Airjitsu- sorry, *Cyclondo* for the first time?" Kai continued, cutting Jay off.

"Me, but you and Cole *really* were-"

"Who single-handedly saved the world in an alternate reality only you remember?"

Jay shuddered, remembering Nadakhan, the ship, Nya dead in his arms. "Me, but I wouldn't say-"

"Who was smart enough to think up and carry out making the Bounty *fly*? Like come on, man, that's our main mode of transportation!"

"*Me*, but-"

“But nothing, Jay. *You* did all of those things. *You*. Imagine where we’d be without you, huh? We never would have made it past that first day!”

“But- but-” Jay fought back tears as he tried to articulate more arguments against Kai. How could he make him *see*? He was weak, he was annoying, he was a *failure*, and it was his fault that Zane was dead and it would have been better off if it was him.

Kai didn't even let him try to say any of that before he was speaking again, turning around properly and looking straight into Jay’s eyes. “You are smart and funny and your brain zips around at the speed of lightning. You’re constantly thinking of new ideas to improve our tech or make our mission plans even better. You think super well on the fly, coming up with great ideas on the spot or, like, solving math problems in your head and coming up with jokes. It’s awesome. And don’t get me started on all the tech stuff! You know how much I suck at that. Watching you work to repair… uh, things and brainstorm ideas is like watching someone do magic.

“You’re super kind and nice to be around. You’re great at noticing when people are sad, even when they’re trying to hide it, and you’re great at making them—or at least *me*—smile again. You’re awkward and bad at deep conversations but you try really hard and you make people feel better by just being there.

“You’re, like, a super good fighter. You’re really fast—the fastest runner out of us by a long shot. And you zip around a fight like it’s nothing. It’s impossible to predict your movements, dude, one moment someone’s trying to block your punch, and then BAM you’ve kicked their legs out from behind! You’re also super good at outsmarting your opponents in battle and using their flaws against them. It doesn’t matter if they’re bigger or stronger than you, there’s no *way* they’re smarter than you and there’s no way they’re winning that fight.

“I just- you’re amazing Jay, alright? You’re good at practically everything and you’re awesome to be around. Hey, do you think I’d let just anyone date my sister? Nah, dude, you’re something special. I know it, Nya knows it- heck, *everyone* knows it! Don’t get down on yourself, dude. I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like you weren’t hot shit because you totally are.”

Jay faintly noticed that his face was wet with tears as Kai ended his little speech. Kai seemed to realize Jay was crying when he let out a sniffle and went to wipe his eyes with his sleeve.

“Oh shit. I’m sorry, man, I didn’t mean to-”

Jay laughed wetly and pulled Kai in for a hug, cutting him off. “Thank you, man,” he said into Kai’s shoulder. “I love you.”

“Uh, yeah, of course, Jay. Any time, dude.” Jay let out another short laugh. Kai was always a bit weird with affection.

Jay sat there for a moment, gripping tightly onto Kai and breathing deeply into his shirt as he awkwardly kept his arms circled around Jay. When he finally released his embrace, he wiped away his tears and took in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Feeling alright?” Kai asked gently.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“That’s alright. You don’t have to.”

“I just feel… I just keep replaying it in my mind. The whole thing. Maybe if I had done something different, if I had been better in battle, if I had noticed what Aspheera was about to do, I could have stopped it. It doesn’t matter how amazing you think I am, it doesn’t matter that it wouldn’t have been better if it were me. It was still *my fault*. I should have *done* something. I should have been *better*.”

“Do you think it’s my fault, then?” Kai asked.

“What? No, of course not. Why would I-”

“I couldn’t even use the stupid scroll. I didn’t have my powers. I was the most useless one in the fight today. So surely, it must be more my fault than yours.”

“Well… that was out of your control. Plus, if I hadn’t sneezed in that vent, they never would have found us and the fight couldn’t have gone south.”

“Come on, you know Aspheera would have torn that place to pieces looking for us. You sneezing didn’t make any difference. If I had fixed the Mech quicker, we could have gotten out scot-free though.”

“I was working on the Mech, too! We were never gonna get it done in time. If I had fought better in the battle at the museum, Aspheera may have never gotten the scroll in the first place and wouldn’t have been able to break into the Monastery.”

“If I hadn’t been such a whiny ass and had gone with you to the museum off the bat, maybe we wouldn’t have lost it!”

“Yeah, well, if I had found a way to escape from the pyramid quicker then we could have gotten to the museum way before she even had the chance to steal it.”

“If I hadn’t gotten my powers stolen.”

“If I hadn’t opened the tomb.”

“If I hadn’t insisted on going into the pyramid so hard.”

“If I had paid attention to when Zane tried to warn me about his dream!”

“Uh.. uh…. If I had refused to join the team after saving Nya then you guys would never have found out Lloyd was the green ninja or have become proper ninja so none of the things that happened while we were ninja would have ever happened. So, really, I’m to blame for everything bad that’s ever happened.”

“Well, I chose to become a ninja first.”

“Shoot. You’re right. Umm...”

“Give it up, Kai, I’m more to blame, no matter how you paint it.”

“Well, what if I had never been born! Then Krux wouldn’t have been able to kidnap Ray and Maya because he wouldn’t have anything to threaten them with so the Time Twins never would have been a threat and Wu wouldn’t have been lost to time and Ray and Maya would have been around being trained ninja to help out and a bunch of bad stuff could have been prevented. *Plus*, I was born before you. So suck it.”

“Only by a few months,” Jay muttered, crossing his arms and pouting exaggeratedly.

Jay and Kai looked at each other and, after a moment, they both burst into laughter.

“What are we even laughing about?” Kai gasped after a minute.

“I don’t know!”

They both calmed down after another few seconds, wiping their eyes.

“Ahh, FSM. Our lives sure are something.”

“Yeah. Yeah, they are.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, watching as the stars began to populate the dark sky.

“Well, I guess it can be your fault, then.” Kai finally said. “But only if it’s mine, too. Deal?”

After a moment of hesitation, Jay sighed and agreed. “Deal.”

“Cool.” A pause. “Are you going to be alright now? Do I need to worry about you jumping off the side of the mountain?”

Jay chuckled humorlessly. “No, don’t worry, I’m not gonna do that. What good would that be? I’m fine.” Jay wrapped his arms around himself and stared back, eyes not focusing on the dark night sky above him. A heavy weight still settled in his heart as a gust of icy wind gusted past them. “It still hurts, though.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kai sighed, staring out alongside Jay. “It’s always hard. I just wish… shoot, sorry, poor wording.” Jay shrugged, too exhausted to focus on it.

“You wish what?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Kai said quickly. “I want Zane to still be here, that’s all.” Jay nodded. Kai untangled himself from where he sat and stood up, stretching slightly. “Just remember Jay: you are not to blame for what happened. Okay? And it absolutely should *not* have been you instead. You’re too important.”

Jay just hummed in response. He still wasn’t sure if he could fully believe that but… maybe he could start to.

Kai sighed and Jay looked up to see him extending a hand to him.

"Come on in. I know that you feel like you need to sit out here in the cold by yourself and feel bad to punish yourself. But - like you said - what good will that do? We all need each other right now."

Jay hesitated for a moment. The thought of facing the others after he had screwed up so badly made him feel ill. The thought of being around his family in the warmth of their home when Zane never would again made him feel like he was falling backwards forever and ever.

But Kai was looking at him with those sad eyes filled with so much earnestness. And Jay thought that maybe Zane wouldn't have wanted him to mourn alone.

"Okay." He took Kai's hand.

Notes:

Edit 4/20/24:
Changed the ending slightly to make it more optimistic.

Chapter 5 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/32194186/chapters/79825378): zane – that piercing cold of winter air

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes (#chapter_5_endnotes) .)

Zane stared down at his silver hand, flexing it open and closed. Hesitantly, he allowed the familiar tingle of ice to tickle his fingertips. His heart began to beat faster in his chest.

"Hey, Zane, what's up?" a voice interrupted behind him. Zane quickly cut off the cold dancing across his hand and moved his hand down to his side in what he hoped was a natural manner but probably looked closer to the frenzied rush it was.

"Many things are up: the ceiling, the sky… but I guess the answer really depends on your definition of the word. 'Up' is relative, after all."

Kai rolled his eyes as he stood next to Zane. "Ha ha," he said sarcastically. "You know what I meant." Zane hid his small smile.

Kai closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of the food sizzling away in the pans in front of them. "Mmm, that smells good. Man, I missed your cooking. That Never-Realm food really left something to be desired."

Zane tensed at the mention of the alternate dimension, dreadful memories of his years sat, frozen on the throne, staff clutched in his hand as he ordered his soldiers around to attack village after village filling his mind. Kai didn't notice Zane's reaction, his eyes still closed contentedly. Zane grabbed the pan in front of him and gently shook its contents, ensuring the food cooked properly.

Kai opened his eyes and slapped a hand onto Zane's shoulder. "I'll go tell the guys dinner's ready soon." Zane nodded in confirmation, not looking away from the stovetop in front of him. Kai's hand left his shoulder and Zane heard as his feet disappeared out the kitchen.

He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

-

"Kai! Hey, Zane, make him *stop*. KAI!"

Zane grinned and rolled his eyes as he watched Kai holding Jay's bowl of ice cream over his head, just out of his reach.

"Oh, can't get it yourself, shortie?" Kai taunted.

Jay huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "C'mon, that's not fair. You're only an inch taller than me, anyway!"

"An inch and a *half*."

"Zane!"

"Why do you not ask Cole for help? He is the tallest, after all," Zane said calmly in response to Jay's continuing wails.

The three turned their attention to Cole, who was calmly picking at his own dessert and scrolling through his phone. He looked up at the sound of his name and immediately protested. "Hell no, leave me out of this. I am not moving until I finish eating my precious cake."

Jay groaned as Kai laughed and Cole returned his attention to his phone. Zane became interested as Jay's eyes lit up with mischief.

"Kai, if you don't give it back I'll tell everyone about that time you-"

"Okay, okay!" Kai yelped, cutting Jay off. He jumped down from the table and, once Jay had done the same, handed Jay back his bowl. "Jeez, you're no fun." Kai sulked as Jay grabbed his bowl with a grin. Jay stuck his tongue out in response and sat down to finish his dessert. When he picked up his spoon, however, he frowned.

"Aw, c'mon, it's all melted now!" Kai laughed and snapped his fingers together. A small flame danced between his fingertips. Jay ignored him and tilted his bowl forward to show Zane its liquid contents. "Zane, can you re-freeze it? Please?" He pouted pleadingly.

Zane felt his heart drop in his chest and his fingertips instinctively began to frost over. "Um…" He tried to think of a way out of the situation. "I do not believe my powers would be of much help in this situation. Unless you wish for your ice cream to be completely encased in ice." Not a total lie.

Jay pouted even harder, widening his eyes in a way that reminded Zane of a puppy. "C'mon, at least *try*," he insisted, pushing the bowl closer to Zane.

"Uh…" Zane felt frozen himself, his heart pounding at a mile a minute. He could feel his frosty hands begin to shake under the table. Zane tried to avoid Jay's pouting gaze and accidentally caught Kai's concerned eyes instead.

"Oh my goodness, Jay, you're so lazy," Kai said exasperatedly. He grabbed Jay's bowl, ignoring his immediate protests about having it stolen once again. Kai stalked into the kitchen and Zane heard the freezer door open and shut before Kai returned to the dining room again, holding a new bowl of ice cream in his hand.

"There, you whiny baby. It's probably better than it would've been if you refroze it, anyway," Kai said as he set the bowl down in front of Jay, whose eyes lit up at the sight of the new helping of ice cream. He dug into it, ignoring Kai, who rolled his eyes and sat back down next to him.

Zane caught his eyes again a moment later while Jay and Cole started bickering about whether ice cream or cake was better, and tried to send him a grateful look. If the softening of Kai's eyes was any indication, his message came across successfully.

-

Later that night, Zane lay awake in his bed. He could easily power himself down for the night but he was so unused to sleeping after decades of time without it in the Never-Realm. Instead, he stared at the ceiling above him and tortured himself with his own thoughts and memories.

Tonight, however, his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of creaking floorboards as one of the others got out of their beds and padded quietly across the room. Zane shut his eyes as they passed by him, and tried to slow his breathing in a way that mirrored sleeping. The person faltered for a half-step by his bed but passed by.

Zane waited until he heard the door click open and closed before opening his eyes again. He cast his gaze around the room, his enhanced night vision picking up Jay and Cole's sleeping forms through the dark. Lloyd and Kai's beds were empty, their blankets haphazardly bundled on top. Lloyd was out on a mission of some kind alongside Nya, Pixal, and Master Wu, leaving Kai as the mystery person who had just left the room.

Zane contemplated following after Kai for a moment. On one hand, he wanted to make sure his friend—his *brother*—was alright. On the other hand, Kai seemed the closest out of anyone to figuring out that Zane had been hiding something lately. Zane wasn't sure he wanted to risk any conversation with Kai turning to his own problems—he had already spent the evening trying to avoid talking with Kai after the events at dinner.

Eventually, Zane's concern for Kai beat his selfish fear of talking about his own problems. (Plus, some part of him *hoped* that Kai would bring it up and Zane would have somebody to talk to about it.)

Quietly, Zane removed his blanket from over himself and stood up. He made his way across the room and slipped through the door as Kai had done just minutes before, letting it shut behind him with a soft click.

He began to silently search for Kai through the Monastery, checking the kitchen, training room, bathroom, and even the laundry room (though hiding out in the laundry room and listening to the relaxing whir of the machines was more Cole's memo). Zane was about to give up looking for Kai and return to bed after checking Nya's room with still no results when he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, the large wooden doors to the Monastery's courtyard ajar.

Zane went outside into the courtyard, wincing at the cold wind that cut past him. He made his way to the doors. Sure enough, when he peered through them, he saw Kai sitting on the top step of the long staircase, leaning back onto his hands and staring into the starry night sky.

Zane sat down next to Kai, setting his hands in his lap and staring out at the twinkling lights on Ninjago City in the distance. The two sat for a few moments before Kai broke the silence.

"You know, when I lost my powers in that pyramid, part of me was relieved."

Zane turned his head to look at Kai, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. He remembered when Kai had lost his powers to Aspheera—though it had been much longer ago for Zane than it had been for Kai. He also recalled how upset and angry and useless Kai had felt in the aftermath.

Zane didn't say anything, though, instead waiting for Kai to continue at his own pace.

"Like, obviously I was devastated. My powers are a *part* of me. Fire is a part of me. When it was taken away, I wasn't just useless and powerless, I wasn't *whole*. Ya know?"

Zane couldn't help but nod in agreement. He remembered the times he'd had his own powers taken from him—when his golden weapon was stolen by Garmadon; on Chen's island. Right now, when he had powers, technically, but they weren't *his*.

"But even with all that, there was still a little part of me that felt happy when I couldn't call on my fire. Because then maybe- maybe if I couldn't use my fire, I wouldn't have to constantly fear hurting everyone around me."

Zane felt his mind click the puzzle pieces together. Kai *knew* what Zane was hiding, didn't he? He knew his fear of his own powers after he had seen their—his *own*—destructive capabilities, their capacity to bring harm.

Kai sighed and finally drew his attention away from the sky and onto Zane. Zane, in turn, turned his gaze back onto the horizon, trying to avoid Kai's stare.

"Zane," Kai said softly. "I know what it's like to fear your power, to—to fear yourself. I can promise you: you're a good person. You're not going to hurt any of us."

"You do not know that," Zane protested, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes, I do," Kai insisted. "I know you. I know you would never intentionally hurt anyone."

Zane turned his head sharply towards Kai. "But I *did*." Kai opened his mouth to say something but Zane plowed forward. Now that it was out there, it felt like a barrier had broken—he wanted to spill everything he had been thinking and feeling since he had returned from the Never-Realm.

“I was built to protect those who could not protect themselves. And yet I spent *decades* doing the opposite.” He took a deep breath. “I *hurt* people; my *ice* hurt people. I fear that I am not the person I believed—that *you* all believed—me to be.”

“*Zane*. It’s not your fault! You had your memory wiped!”

“That is no excuse! I should have remembered! And even without my memory I should not have so quickly turned to evil. It just showed who I really am inside: I am evil.”

Kai stayed silent for a moment. Zane feared that perhaps he had succeeded in convincing Kai of his evilness and Kai would tell Zane to leave forever.

Instead, Kai said, “remember Chen’s island? When I... when I attacked Lloyd with Chen’s staff?” Zane nodded slowly, trying to track the connection between the two topics. “Does that make me evil?” Kai asked. His tone was unreadable.

“Of course not,” Zane was quick to refute.

“Why not?”

“Because you were under the influence of Chen’s staff!”

“And *you* were under the influence of the Scroll of Hidden Spinjitsu,” Kai said.

Zane’s mind blanked for a moment. “But that’s *different*,” he insisted.

“How so?”

Zane scrambled for something to say for a moment but words failed him.

“You’re right, though, it was different,” Kai said. Zane didn’t know whether to feel relieved or dreadful that Kai was agreeing with him. “Because your memory was wiped and mine wasn’t. You didn’t know any different, you didn’t know that Vex was feeding you lies. *I* still had all my thoughts and memories. And, in fact, I was acting on my own thoughts. If anything, that makes me more evil in this comparison.”

“But-” Zane was grasping at straws at this point but was unwilling to believe what Kai was saying. “But you snapped out of it after just minutes. It took me *sixty years* .”

Zane could see Kai’s eyes soften in sympathy in the moonlight. “I was lucky enough to have Lloyd and Skylor and all of you there to snap me out of it immediately. You didn’t have that privilege. And that was *our* fault, not yours.”

Zane sat quietly for a few minutes, contemplating what Kai had said. It made sense, in a way. The logical part of him reasoned that it made little sense to blame himself for things he would not fault the others for doing. But still, the overwhelming majority of his thoughts continued to argue that he *was* at fault and he *was* evil. He wasn’t sure that the feelings of guilt and fear for what he had done would ever go away. He wasn’t sure he deserved them to.

“What about my powers?” Zane said, trying to switch topics. He stared down at his hands, flexing them as he had done earlier as he had cooked. “I do not think I can use them anymore knowing how much harm they have brought. That they may still bring.”

Kai turned his attention to his own hands. He clenched his fists. “The first day that I unlocked my powers, after I found my true potential, I burned Nya. I had passed out after the volcano and then when I came to she was standing there and I was so excited about unlocking my true potential so I pulled her in for a hug and I wasn’t used to them yet, I wasn’t expecting to burst into flames, I-” Kai trailed off, taking a deep breath.

“And earlier that day, in the volcano, I made it erupt because I took my golden weapon out and it made everything unstable. And I ended up saving Lloyd and everything was fine, thank FSM, but… it almost wasn’t.”

Zane sat quietly as Kai continued to talk, more stories of close calls spilling out of him, his voice getting more and more anxious. “And there was that day in the tunnel… when I set that jet fuel tankard on fire? That day we went to space; when I was trailing Cryptor.” Zane remembered. It had been one of Kai’s more disastrous missions. “Just sitting on that truck, waiting for it to explode… I was terrified. And I realized: that’s how other people must feel about fire. About *my* fire. I- I scare people. It’s *so* easy for me to hurt them.

“And I don’t even have any cool benefits like you all do! You can build ice sculptures and slides, Cole can do the same with rock—hell, even Jay can power stuff up with his lightning! And even your ice doesn’t kill people, it just traps them for a bit. I just-”

Kai turned his face away, staring out over the horizon. His eyes looked glassy and wet in the moonlight. Maybe they were. “Sometimes I wonder why you guys keep me on the team,” he whispered. “We’re supposed to save and protect people and all I do is cause harm.”

That was the last straw for Zane. “Kai, that is one of the most illogical things I have ever heard. And I have known you for a few years.” Kai chuckled slightly.

“You do not just cause harm. Sure, your power is one of destruction, but it is the way that you utilize it that really matters. You use your powers for good, to help people. In the wrong hands, your powers *could* cause great harm, but that is why it is so good that they are possessed by you.”

“But I *have* caused harm in the past! Weren’t you listening?”

“Yes, but those were accidents and outliers. Everybody is prone to mistakes. It is how you move past those mistakes that matters. Even after everything you have done and been through, you continue to only use your powers for the benefit of Ninjago, to save people. Your powers and their capacity for destruction do not define you—your actions and the choices you make do. And those have shown that you are a *good* person, Kai, and a great ninja.”

There were a few beats of silence where Kai seemed to absorb everything Zane said. Finally, he said, “So you're saying that even though my powers are capable of bringing harm, and even though I have done bad things in the past, I am still a good person because I make the choice to be?”

“Precisely,” Zane confirmed.

Zane watched as Kai turned back to him. The two ninja stared at each other for a minute before Kai sighed and said, “for one of the smartest people I know, you sure are an idiot.”

Kai’s words suddenly slotted their way into Zane’s mind and he connected the dots. “Oh,” he breathed.

“There we go,” Kai said, grinning. “And you can’t even argue with me on this because you’re the one who said it!”

Zane scowled but he found he couldn’t argue with Kai’s logic, nor his own. “Did you lie to me and make everything up just so I would say that?” Zane asked, hurt. He knew that Kai had different views on lying than himself but still felt a bit peeved that Kai would fabricate so much to manipulate him into doing something.

“No,” Kai said, his smile dropping slightly. “I told you all of that so you would reach that conclusion but… I didn’t make anything up. All of those stories and those feelings were- are true.”

Zane felt his heart lighten somewhat, glad that Kai hadn’t lied to him. Though he couldn’t say he was pleased to hear that everything Kai had told him had been true. Zane certainly had not been the only one hiding fears and insecurities from everyone.

He hummed in thought before saying cautiously, “thank you, Kai. For helping me. I do not know whether I can fully believe what I said in regards to myself yet but it is nice to know that the logic is there. And it is nice to know that you will ‘have my back,’ as it were.”

“Anytime, bud.” Kai smiled.

They continued to sit in silence for a while. Soon, the sky began to lighten around the horizon and Zane could hear the tittering chirps of birds in the sparse trees that surrounded the Monastery. Even with his internal clock, he hadn’t realized how much time had passed.

As the tip of the sun became visible over the dimming lights of Ninjago City, Kai stood and stretched. “I’m so going to regret staying up all night,” he yawned. “Oh well. Zane, you cool to make breakfast? You don’t have to but I really did miss your food.”

Zane nodded. “Of course.” He couldn’t deny that he also enjoyed cooking for his friends after so much time being unable to do so. It felt familiar even after so many years. It felt like home.

“Wait, Kai,” Zane called as Kai reached the wooden doors into the Monastery courtyard. Kai turned around with a hum.

“Yeah?”

“Does it ever go away? The fear?” He held up his hand to signify what he meant, the words still feeling too frightening on his tongue.

Kai’s brows furrowed in sympathy and he held up and looked at his own hand. He rubbed his fingertips together before starting a small fire between them. After a moment, he drew his fingers apart and the flame extinguished.

“No. But it gets easier.”

With that, Kai slipped through the crack between the doors, leaving Zane alone on the stairway.

Zane let out a deep breath, feeling his heart begin to pound as he directed his gaze to his fingertips. He slowly spread them apart and allowed a small ball of ice to form above his palm. After a moment, he clenched his fist and it exploded into a small flurry of snow. As he watched the tiny snowflakes spiral to the ground, he let out a small smile.

Yeah. It would get easier.

Notes:

And that's it!

For those of you who care about my thought process behind this fic: I love analyzing the ways that the ninja may interact and process things off-screen and in-between seasons. I wanted to explore the way I thought each ninja would be most effectively comforted in times of stress. So I based each chapter on a ninja, a problem, and what I thought would be the best course of action for that character. (and kai was my throughline bc i love him)

A simple rundown:

- Nya: confrontation; directly facing the problem
- Lloyd: distraction; having fun and being a kid
- Cole: presence; just having someone there
- Jay: directness; explicit compliments, etc.
- Zane: logic; solving the problem with reason
- Kai: usefulness; helping the others

Anyway, thank you all for reading and leaving kudos and such nice comments. See y'all around!

~nickels

Close (#)